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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001950

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/12/2018
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER ASEC CASC BL
SUBJECT: BOLIVIA: VIOLENCE WORSE, DIALOGUE DOUBTFUL

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 b,d

¶1. (C) Summary: In the worst of the recent violence between ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS)-aligned groups and autonomists, eight people were killed in the northern department of Pando on September 11. The central government has rejected an offer of a visit of high-level Friends Group mediators, while the opposition CONALDE prefects are calling for the involvement of the OAS or the Catholic Church. Tarija Prefect Cossio is headed to La Paz at the invitation of Presidency Minister Quintana to "open a window for dialogue" in a meeting scheduled for 6pm September 12. In light of troop movements in Santa Cruz and the hydrocarbon fields of the Chaco, however, CONALDE questions whether the government wants dialogue or to impose its will by force.
End summary.

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Violence Between Civilian Groups
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¶2. (C) September 11 marked a dramatic increase in violence, as civic committee and prefecture employees clashed with MAS-aligned campesinos leaving eight people dead and over thirty wounded in the opposition department of Pando, along the Peruvian/Brazilian border. Both sides were reportedly using firearms, and it is not clear who started the violence.

Press reports say that the opposition-aligned civic committee and prefecture employees attempted to block a group of MAS supporters from the neighboring department of Beni from entering into the capital of Pando. The press also reports that the opposition civic committee took fifteen "hostages" back to their headquarters to be questioned about who paid them and gave them guns. In Santa Cruz, opposition and MAS supporters are preparing for more violence in the MAS-aligned neighborhood of Plan 3000, while the Santa Cruz Youth Union and opposition-aligned indigenous groups took

over the offices of CIDOB, a MAS-aligned indigenous coalition. Tarija City is calm, according to various Embassy contacts. Ruben Ardaya, Tarija Development official currently in Santa Cruz, told Emboff that Potosi miners have been sent to Tarija with dynamite, but "we know where they are and have them well controlled."

¶ 13. (C) As is the practice of Morales and the MAS, the central government has called on its social groups to "defend democracy" and mobilize against the opposition. Union leaders, cocaleros, and the indigenous militia Red Ponchos have announced that they will "retake" government institutions taken by the opposition. Eugenio Rojas, leader of the Red Ponchos, announced, "We declare a state of emergency of the indigenous peoples in all of Bolivia...we invite all young people to organize to take the lands and, if the aggression continues, we will take the factories of those aggressors. Santa Cruz doesn't know what it's gotten itself into." MAS Senator and cocalero leader Lino Villca announced that his followers "will defend (democracy) with their lives." The national federation of cooperative miners FENCOMIN has announced that its members will move into the opposition regions to retake government buildings. MAS Congressional Majority Leader Cesar Navarro applauded the social movements' actions: "They are the promoters of this transformation and they will be the first defense of the process; it can't be done with just the vote."

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Opposition CONALDE Defiant
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¶ 14. (C) Ruben Ardaya, Tarija Development official who is currently working with CONALDE in Santa Cruz, told Emboff that the recent opposition action is a "consolidation of six months of the autonomy process into two days." In Beni and Santa Cruz, the autonomists are naming new administrators for the central government offices taken by their supporters. Santa Cruz's Legislative Assembly (not recognized by the central government) is currently debating a law that would allow Santa Cruz Prefect Costas to name transitional heads of taken central-government agencies.

¶ 15. (C) In Tarija and the Chaco region, there are ongoing efforts to take hydrocarbon installations. Ardaya said that by taking control of the gas valves, the autonomists plan to starve the central government of power. Ardaya suggested that the opposition forced are likely to take over more valves in the coming days and will also attempt to take a major refinery and a "principal valve" on the line to Brazil (at Rio Grande - near the city of Santa Cruz).

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Troop Movement
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¶ 16. (C) Press and various sources are reporting troop movement into Santa Cruz and the Chaco region of Tarija. Sources tell us that three divisions have moved east into or on the border with opposition departments and two regiments of armored vehicles have moved to the border of Santa Cruz (15 to 18 vehicles total). Staff from Chief of Defense Trigo told DAO that on September 10 Trigo demanded a written order from President Morales authorizing the use of force against civilians in the opposition regions. The Armed Forces' refusal to use force against civilians has put many soldiers in the opposition area in harm's way, as they are confronted with civilians who forcibly take their weapons and protective gear.

¶ 17. (C) Santa Cruz contacts told Emboff that the opposition plans not to act against the troops, to avoid provoking any violence. As long as there is no provocation, Santa Cruz contacts expect that the military will not move against them. Ruben Ardaya, the Tarija Development official posted in Santa Cruz, told Emboff that he was aware of the troop movement to Santa Cruz and Chaco, but he was "convinced that the military won't do anything." In fact, Ardaya said that

CONALDE believes the deployment of troops could be a big mistake on the part of the central government and, if forced into action, the military units are more likely to revolt against the government. DAO contacts suggest that the military's plan at the moment is to continue pushing for a definitive order from the central government to use force against the opposition, which they are unlikely to get.

(Note: Since the civilian deaths of 2003 and 2006, Bolivian governments are generally seen to be reluctant to authorize the military or police to use force against civilians. However, in August 2008 Evo's government sent police to disperse a protest by state-employed miners, resulting in the deaths of two miners. Evo has not received any significant public blame for those deaths. End note.)

¶8. (C) There is much speculation that the troop deployments into Santa Cruz are intended to carry out arrests of the opposition's senior leadership. Such an action would likely provoke riots and violence by the civilian population. Post held an EAC on September 12 and decided to relocate DEA and NAS personnel in Santa Cruz and Trinidad (Beni) based on specific threat information. We are issuing a warden message advising Amcits to leave the conflict areas.

- - - - - International Attention: Morales Rejects Brazilian Mediation - - - - -

¶9. (C) The Bolivian state news agency ABI is reporting that Argentine President Cristina Kirchner has released a statement declaring Argentina's "full and unconditional support for the constitutional government of President Evo Morales Ayma." Brazilian President Lula's foreign policy advisor said in a news conference that Brazil "will not tolerate a rupture in the constitutional order of Bolivia." According to our contacts at the Brazilian embassy in La Paz, a mission of high-level Friends Group officials were ready to arrive in La Paz on September 12, but the Bolivian government declined their offer. The Brazilian embassy also told us that OAS official Dante Caputo offered his assistance, but that Bolivian Foreign Minister Choquehuanca told him there was "no need, everything is fine." The Brazilian embassy is very concerned: they view the central government's unwillingness to accept help as a sign that Evo is determined to follow a course of confrontation.

¶10. (C) Contacts in Tarija and the opposition tell us that CONALDE has given Tarija Prefect Cossio two firm requirements for any negotiation with the government in his meeting scheduled for September 12 at 6pm: hydrocarbon tax revenues must be returned to the departments and there must be no referendum on the constitution. Santa Cruz Prefect Costas may also attend. Contacts tell us that CONALDE suspects the meeting with Cossio may be a trap to arrest him, and they are preparing for the worst in the opposition departments.
(Comment: If CONALDE's two points are in fact non-negotiable, there is little likelihood of positive dialogue with the government. End comment.)

¶11. (C) While the central government entertained an offer of high-level Friends Group (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia) officials as mediators, the opposition has requested involvement of the OAS or the Catholic church. Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas and Civic Committee President Branco Marinkovic told Emboff that Brazilian President Lula must step in and clearly tell Evo to stop the crackdown. If this fails, they see the UN as the only other option (the opposition does not have confidence in the OAS.)

¶12. (C) Bolivian press are quoting Venezuelan President Chavez's statements regarding the possibility of Venezuelan military intervention in Bolivia in the event that Evo's reign is threatened. Chief of Defense Trigo publicly rejected the possibility of Venezuelan intervention at a noon September 12 press appearance.

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